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Haritha Pavithran

Assistant Professor English,

Bhaktavatsalam Memorial College for Women,

Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

haritha221b@gmail.com

Internet Memes: The New Paradigm of Political Satire

Abstract : ‘Meme’ is no more a strange term for the populace of the online world. Professor Limor Shifman views meme as a part of “(post)modern folklore”. As the world runs short on time and has shrunken, memes make a suitable mode of communication; be it for conveying new ideas or to mobilize the public during the times of crisis. However, the importance and impact of memes in our everyday language, politics or ideologies are often overlooked. In that broad context, the paper explores how the phenomenon of internet meme becomes a new paradigm of political satire by replacing the pen-and-paper caricatures, in the contemporary period. The argument is elucidated by incorporating Thomas Kuhn’s famous theory of Paradigm and Paradigm Shift into Cultural Studies. The paper also briefly illustrates how Kuhn’s theory may offer an explanation to the future of the internet meme as a mode of online communication.

Keywords - Cultural Studies, Meme, Paradigm, Paradigm Shift, Political Satire.

1. Introduction

Cultural Studies is defined as “a field of at times intractable complexity and perhaps the first great academic experiment in the attempted formation of a ‘non-disciplinary’ discipline” (Willis xxiv). The primary aim of cultural studies is to learn how the symbiotic as well as interplay of various disciplines construct culture and how it evolves. As the field of English Literature has already turned more interdisciplinary in nature and is growing as ‘English and Culture Studies’, a study of the current trend of memes too is related to such an approach to literature. In this light, the paper shall specifically focus on meme as a paradigm of political satire. The paper borrows its framework from Thomas Kuhn’s Theory of Paradigm and Paradigm Shift. Though the theory focuses on the discipline of science, it has its epochs in various other disciplines too, be it Literature or Politics.

The subsequent sections, ‘Paradigm, Paradigm Shift, and Meme’ shall discuss the origin and introduce the given terms respectively. ‘Meme as a Paradigm of Political Satire’ and its subsection, ‘Memes over Caricature’, look at how memes emerge as a fresh framework of political satire, replacing other old forms. The ‘Conclusion’ summarizes the argument of the paper and proposes further areas of research.

2. Paradigm, Paradigm Shift, and Meme.

One of the most misused words in the English language could be ‘paradigm’. The peripheral meaning of the word is simply a ‘pattern’ or a ‘model’. However, the term was coined and used in its unadulterated sense by Thomas Kuhn in his structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962). Ever since, the term has been used inside and outside the academic circles.

Traditionally, where Science is viewed as a continuous process of finding the ‘Truth’, Kuhn, a well-known physicist, historian and philosopher of science, came to the scene with his

controversial argument that this process is fragmentary, and scientific evolution does not concern itself with finding the truth. That is to say, the scientific process is interrupted by the breakthrough phrases that disturb the existing and established patterns or scientific paradigms. The path-breaking change from one paradigm to the other is what Kuhn calls a Paradigm Shift. Also, each shift happens when the synchronic background of a particular scientific data into account. That is to say, science in dynamic and its development does not follow a linear pattern.

In Kuhn's words, a Paradigm is, "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (viii). For example, Galileo's Mechanics or Newton's Theory of Gravity. Kuhn divides the scientific process into different phases. In the pre-scientific phase, the scientists make various interpretations of a particular puzzle or problem. They come up with theories where "the scientist's world is qualitatively transformed as well as quantitatively enriched by fundamental novelties of either fact or theory" (7). When the theory becomes more and more acceptable, it becomes a paradigm thereby establishing a community or a "subsequent generation of "electricians" with a common paradigm for its research" (15). It then leads to normal science, which is a rigid set of facts that scientists try to elucidate and expand. According to Kuhn, scientists spend their time doing this. At a later stage, well-founded assumptions are made, making science homogeneous. Therefore, it takes a long time before finding an anomaly and disagreeing with the received beliefs.

Thus, the framework that contains the dominant theory and practice at a particular time, in any discipline can be called a Paradigm. An observation that we make is limited by this framework (This is an important idea that is well received outside the realms of science and can be aptly applied in the literature, when theories are given more importance than the text to which they are applied). When new discoveries and observations that fundamentally alter the predominant framework are made, a crisis is reached. The theory hence becomes incompatible

and therefore collapses. A new theory that is capable of accommodating these observations is then proposed. This fundamental shift is what Kuhn calls the Paradigm Shift that leads to scientific revolutions. For example, Aristotle's Physics replaced by that of Galileo's or Newtonian physics replaced by Einsteinian Theory of Relativity.

The term 'meme' (from Greek mimema or that which is imitated), on the other hand, was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He defines it as a self-replicating unit of culture, (example: clothes or music) that is dominant at a particular period in time. An internet meme, its subset that we can see in popular social networking platforms, is simply a silly picture or a video that is humorous or satirical, and spreads 'virally'. Today 'meming' is a popular past time for the young generation. For instance, figure 1 given below is a popular U.K-based poster from which the subsequent meme (figure 2) was derived.



Fig. 1. A poster that was popular in Britain during WWII, from : K, Walter. "Keep Calm and Carry On." Know Your Meme , 2010, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/keep-calm-and-carry-on>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2018.



Fig. 2. A meme based on the poster, from: "Ask the Google." Know Your Meme, 2017, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ask-the-google>. Accessed 2 Jan.2019.

More commonly, a popular contemporary movie scene/dialogue or new-worthy events of the society inspire new memes. Some of the popular image memes are known by the tags, 'grumpy cat', 'distracted boyfriend' and 'exit 12'. The pop video 'Gangnam Style', written and performed by the Korean artist PSY is a good example of a video meme. Also, though the video is seemingly silly, it in fact is a subtle mockery of the materialism of the South Korean people and even points out the country's alarming credit card debt rates. Max Fisher in his article "Gangnam Style, Dissected: The Subversive Message within South Korea's Music Video Sensation", calls this pop video a "gentle satire" and explains how the lyrics "suggests a subtext with a surprisingly subversive message about class and wealth in contemporary South Korean society" (Fisher).

3. Meme as a Paradigm of Political Satire

Kuhn's much discussed theory of Paradigm Shift has been liberally borrowed to understand revolutions in other disciplines too. We shall now look at memes of political satire.

Political memes have been reigning the online world for over two decades, serving as a Paradigm and creating a Paradigm Shift in the realm of satire.

As we know, satire a genre of literature, “although seemingly humorous, is essentially an attack on a person or an institution. Satire has historically been used as a means of discrediting those in authority” (Plevirti 11). If the content of the satire reflects the mentality of the period during which it is created, even the form in which it is manifested also is, a direct product of time. In that sense, satire acquires a new face online through internet memes. Among them, politics memes are relatively popular. Figures 3 to 5 are fine examples of political memes.



Figure 3. A meme based on the Bihar elections, India (2017), from: "Modi Memes." Make a Meme.org, 2017, <https://makeameme.org/memes/modimeme>. Accessed 12Nov. 2018.



Figure 4. A meme on Trump, from: Dankerson. "Donald Trump." Imgflip, <https://imgflip.com/i/qszev>. Accessed, 13 Dec. 2018.



Figure 5. A popular meme satirizing Kim Jong Un's 'democratic' North Korea, from: kickassia. "Yay for North Korean Democracy." MemeCenter, <https://www.memecenter.com/fun/2940549/yay-for-north-korean-democracy>. Accessed, 1 Feb. 2019.

One cannot specifically locate how the online political meme revolution started. However, the emergence of memes that consciously aimed at creating political paradigm shifts by challenging ideologies like Capitalism was recognized by the social activist Andrew Boyd as the “meme warfare” since 2003. Recently, the political memes’ popularity reached its peak with the wake of the 2016 U.S presidential elections. Today, memes give voice to the criticisms and opinions of the mass unlike a few years back where “the idea of using memes to political ends was still housed within a fairly slim leftist- activist corridor” (Haddow).

Political memes mostly are created by the youngsters and have instilled an awareness of the regional as well as the global politics among the common men. A meme in this online era seems to be the fastest means of communicating an idea, information or news. It might not then be surprising to know that the North Western University in Canada offers a course on memes to learn “the ways that internet memes reflect and influence society as a whole”(Hoffman).

3.1. Memes Over Caricatures

Since memes have become the new paradigm of political satire, they have almost replaced the classic pen-and-paper political caricatures. Memes have also replaced their digitalized versions too. Caricatures which were popular since 17th Century were mainly capsules of political satires. After the World War II, the reach and impact of caricatures were widespread and they challenged the genre of photography.

The main difference between a caricature and a meme lies in the free ownership. In his blog post, “In Age of Memes Political Cartoons Die a Silent Death”, R. Rangaraj comments that the use and impact of caricatures in newspapers have gone downhill, in India except perhaps in Kerala. A senior Chennai-based caricaturist Madan opines:

The reason for the falling popularity of cartoons can be attributed to the internet and the ease with which memes can be created and disseminated today. Everyone can be a cartoonist. The only reason that used to prevent people from being cartoonists was the inability to draw. With the advent of the internet, these disabilities have been removed. (Rangraj)

These satirical memes grab people's attention more quickly than any other means of mass communication. Also, the anonymity also helps to execute the freedom of expression in strict countries. Thov Remie in his *Memes as Visual Tools for Precise Message Conveying* records how in countries like China with high degree of citizen censorship, "anonymity allows users to appropriate and repurpose humorous image-based memes in ways that simultaneously challenge and reproduce hegemonic culture" (5). Recently, various memes marking mixed mob reactions were popular during the U.S election campaign and the demonetization in India. The fascist rule of Kim Jong-Un is also a favourite topic for memes among young meme makers.

4. Conclusion

Memes bombard us with perspectives and have replaced the existing conventions of communication. Political memes specifically have become effective tools of protest and of awareness. They also seem to have the potential to influence the political decision making (as is evident from the U.S elections 2016) and give the power to criticize to the common man. In that sense a political meme is also highly democratic in nature. They have surfaced over the political caricatures, creating an evident shift in the means of satirizing politics. However, due to its lack of depth and authenticity of the source it can also easily misguide people. This is one of the major challenges of memes.

As for the scope for further study of the memes, the influence of memes on gender stereotyping as well as mainstreaming can be an important area to explore in the contemporary

time. Quantitative and qualitative research methodologies can be employed to analyse how internet memes connect popular culture with gender, politics, and other academic as well as non-academic arenas .

At the end, it is important to ask if memes can then be called as the highest spot of the online communication evolution or be claimed as progress. Here is yet again where Kuhn's observation on Paradigm Shift becomes relevant. As he opines, each scientific paradigm shift or revolution does not necessarily pave the way towards a more adequate sense of truth. It can be said that the same is the case with internet memes; be it as a means of online communication or political satire. However, memes shall continue to reign until a new paradigm buries it.

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